

False Alarms

BYLINE: John Mueller

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The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks were off the charts: No act of terrorism has done as much damage. In the past century fewer than 20 terrorist attacks killed as many as 100 people, and none killed more than 400. Until 2001, far fewer Americans were killed in any grouping of years by international terrorism than were killed by lightning.

For many, last year's attacks represent a historical shift ("everything has changed"), suggesting that such extensive destruction will now become routine. But a case can be made -- though certainly not proved -- that rather than foreshadowing the future, the attacks may turn out to be an aberration, even while raising the preparedness bar and thus reducing the impact of smaller-scale attacks.

In the past, calamitous events have often failed to predict future patterns. World War II was the most destructive war in history. It has yet to inspire the sequel that was commonly anticipated when historian Arnold Toynbee was confidently declaring it "already apparent" that World War II "was not the climax of this crescendo movement."

When the Communists fomented a coup in democratic Czechoslovakia in 1948, there were great fears that this would be followed by further Communist takeovers in Europe. But it wasn't. Communist aggression in Korea in 1950 was deeply alarming, and the Joint Chiefs became convinced it was a feint for a major attack on Europe. In fact, there were no Koreas after Korea.

It was widely feared that Cuba's embrace of Soviet communism would be repeated all over Latin America. It wasn't. And when the Cuban missile crisis was resolved in 1962, many believed the Soviets would respond by creating trouble in Berlin. But Cuba proved to be the last true crisis of the Cold War.

The Soviet Union's invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in 1979 was not the first step in an effort to expand into the Middle East and South Asia. And ethnic warfare in Europe in the early 1990s did not metastasize all over the continent as feared.

Many other doomsday predictions have failed to hold, among them that dozens of countries would have nuclear weapons by now, that the Soviets would get to the moon first, and that a nuclear weapon would inevitably explode -- as C.P. Snow put it in 1960: "Within, at the most, ten years, some of those bombs are going off. . . . That is the certainty."

The same has been true for some terrorist acts. Since its release of poison gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, an attack that sickened thousands and killed 12, the apocalyptic Aum Shinrikyo appears to have abandoned the terrorism business.

Timothy McVeigh's destructive truck bombing in Oklahoma City has, at least thus far, failed to inspire American imitators.

Not all extreme events prove to be the last in their line, of course: The terrible World War I was followed by a worse one. Nor is deep concern about extreme events unreasonable or necessarily harmful. The forceful response in Korea may have helped to dissuade the Communists from further direct military probes; the reaction to the Soviets' Cuban venture, to discredit crisis as a tactic; intervention in the Balkans, to contain the conflicts there. Moreover, while Aum Shinrikyo and Libya's Moammar Gaddafi may be under control, al Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups are unlikely to die out any time soon: Sept. 11 was, after all, al Qaeda's second attempt to destroy the World Trade Center.

Under the circumstances, heightening security is certainly sensible, but it is important that this be done without inducing hysteria and thus bringing about the economic and social damage that the terrorists seek but are unable to create on their own. This is a difficult challenge. Officials and the media could help by more often putting threats in context and by assessing reasonable probabilities rather than stressing extreme possibilities -- noting, for example, that making an atomic bomb is an extraordinarily difficult task and that warnings about terrorists with nuclear weapons have been voiced repeatedly since the 1950s.

Unfortunately, extreme and alarmist possibilities arrest attention more than discussions of broader context, and there is more danger to one's reputation in underplaying risks than in exaggerating them. Disproved doomsayers can always claim that caution induced by their warnings prevented the predicted calamity from occurring (call it the Y2K effect). Disproved Pollyannas have no such convenient refuge.

But much of the alarmism is simply not reasonable -- the argument that the United States has become vulnerable, even fragile, for example. All societies are vulnerable to tiny bands of suicidal fanatics, but the United States is hardly vulnerable in the sense that it can be toppled by extreme and dramatic acts of terrorist destruction -- the country can, however grimly, readily absorb that kind of damage. (It does, after all, "absorb" some 40,000 deaths each year from automobile accidents.) And the experience of the past year suggests that public morale is quite resilient.

The dangers and uncertainties are always out there. But the sky, as it happens, is not falling.

The writer is a professor of political science at Ohio State University. This article is adapted from an essay in the Fall 2002 issue of the National Interest.